been trying hard not to get into trouble (but i've got a war on my mind) by barbiewrites

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Summary:

Susan doesn’t know Billy.

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Author's Note:

title is from ride by lana del rey

Susan doesn't know Billy.

She knows things about him - that he's seventeen, he loves Metallica, he plays basketball. She knows he's angry about a lot of things and she understands why.

This isn't the first abusive guy she's picked up, not at all. Max's father, John, has cruel lips and savage fists. She endures his abuse for years, cries herself to sleep countless times, bites her lips raw when she has something to say but couldn't pull the words up. When she becomes pregnant with Max, John stops hitting her. She thinks things are looking up, that maybe things'll get better when Max is born. He's still cruel with his words when it's late at night, but he hasn't laid an angry hand on her since the first morning she was sick.

Susan is alone, save for John, at the hospital when her baby is born. A girl, with a head of red hair and blue eyes like the ocean. None of her family come despite John's invites, but she assumes it's because they're busy. John hadn't told a single one of them.

Susan names her Maxine; *greatest.*

It stays in this rocky “good” state for years. John only snaps at her when Max can’t hear, only hits her in the privacy of their room. When Max is nine, John has a stroke at work and dies. Susan cries at the funeral. Max doesn’t.

Susan meets Neil shortly after Max’s eleventh birthday. When Max turns twelve, they move from Carlsbad to San Diego.

There are a lot of good things about Susan’s life in San Diego. Her husband makes a lot of money, so much so that she doesn’t need to work. She spends the day sewing and preparing dinner, tidying up the house. She likes that Max is safe, that Neil hasn’t so much as passed her a rude glance. Most of all, she likes that Neil doesn’t hit her.

There are things she doesn’t like as much, too. She doesn’t like how her stepson treats Max - like an inconvenience to be dealt with and nothing more. She doesn’t like when he punches holes through the drywall or his door. She knows teenage boys are supposed to be rowdy and excited, but this isn’t excitement. The anger scares Max - and Susan, honestly - and Neil picks up on that. He always assures the both of them that he’ll calm Billy down.

And he does. He always slips into Billy’s room and Susan listens, hands clamped over Max’s ears as Billy yells expletives and punches through things. The room will go quiet and minutes later Neil will step out, followed by Billy with a hung head. He always apologises.

Max is thirteen when they move to Hawkins. Susan is apprehensive at first - San Diego was already far from her family, and now *Indiana*? But Neil is charming and trustworthy and he promises they can buy a fixer-upper outside the little town and live happily ever after.

It's two weeks after the first box arrived that she first sees Neil slap Billy across the face. He's packed something he shouldn't have and Neil's seen it. Susan knows Billy is a hard egg - he talks back, has no respect, spits in the house - but he's still a kid. Newly seventeen years old, and when she hears the sound of Neil's palm crossing his cheek, it's like she can feel John's hands on her. Max is asleep by now, thankfully, and Neil pays her no attention when she slips into the master bathroom and sobs. This is her fault. It's following her, like a sickness. She's turning men against their families and she knows it's all her fault.

She can't sleep that night. The sick sound of Billy being hit haunts her, and more than once she flips and turns to Neil, then back away. Towards again, then back away. She hears the grandfather clock chime one o'clock and she decides that she needs a shot of whiskey or an aspirin - maybe both - and heads into the kitchen.

Billy is sitting on the counter, a bag of frozen vegetables to his eye and smoking a cigarette. He looks up when she comes into the doorway, his chin tilting upwards.

"What?" He asks, and it feels like an accusation.

"I'm sorry, Billy." She admits, one manicured hand coming to cover her mouth as she breaks into a sob. "I'm so, so sorry. This is all my fault, Billy, I - I keep doing this to men, making them turn on their families. I wish I could stop but I don't know what I'm doing that makes him like this. I'm so sorry."

Billy watches her with a bored expression, his jaw setting when she's

finished. He takes a long drag, the only sound in the house being Susan's tiny, girlish sobs, then exhales quickly.

"You really think you're that *fuckin*' special?"

Something horrible turns in her stomach as he says that. He's quick to stub his cigarette out in the ashtray, to throw his vegetables back into the freezer, then leaves without another word. Things make sense now.

Billy wasn't angry just because. No, not just to be angry. When Neil went into his room to "talk" Billy out of his moods, the sound of flesh meeting wood or plastic wasn't done by Billy's choice. He'd flinched when Neil raised his hand to strike him.

As the leaves change from a lush green to a ripe red and pale yellow, Susan sees more and more of it. Neil is obviously far less concerned with hiding it from her now that they've left California, but he hides it from Max. When she's out with her new friends, or sleeping, or simply in the yard, Neil has no problems striking his son.

She knows she should leave him. The issue isn't a why or a when but a *how*.

Living in Indiana, now, Neil insists on her staying home like she had in California. He checks the mail every morning and afternoon before and after the mailman comes, and she knows he's checking if she's writing to her family. Her sister writes her one day to tell her that she's having another baby, that they should come down in June to meet the new family member. Neil stands beside her while she writes

her response, telling her that unfortunately, money was tight and they simply couldn't afford a trip back so quickly.

Every time he does it, she tries to speak up. The words never seem to make it out, though, like they're clogging up her throat and making her choke. She knows what it's like to be in Billy's shoes and she drowns in her own guilt every night knowing she's *letting* it happen.

The first time she manages a few meek words is in November. She's just as worried about Max as Neil is, but it doesn't excuse the man for beating his own son. She risks so much in so few words.

Her safety. *Max's* safety.

New Years comes and goes and things begin changing. She can see some camaraderie forming between Max and Billy - it isn't obvious, but Susan learns that if she wants to know Billy she can't *blink*. He stops complaining about picking her up from things. He stops *watching* her and starts *babysitting* her. When he scrapes his fork against his plate at dinner, she doesn't call him obnoxious.

Neil picks up on some of this. Namely, the lack of complaints. It's late when Billy comes home, glowing and obviously chipper than usual, when Neil confronts him about it.

"Just trying to be *responsible*, old man." He answers. It's far too confident for Neil's tastes and the elder backhands him anyway, hissing something about humility, then stalks into the room. Billy stays bent over, clutching his cheek for a few minutes as he recovers. Susan's eyes are trained on him, watching with the same horrified

curiosity as you do a car crash. He glances up to check if she's looking, a wet gleam to his eyes. Billy sets his jaw, straightens up, then walks into his room and slams the door. She feels as useless as she did that very first night. She hates the feeling.

Susan's feet are light as she peeks into the master bedroom, seeing Neil's sleeping form tucked on the right side of the bed before she's rushing back to the kitchen. She collects the same bag of frozen vegetables, wraps them in a tea towel and pads over to Billy's door. She thinks several minutes pass with her hand raised and poised, ready to knock.

She forces herself to think of how Billy's mom would feel to see her son being beaten every shade in the rainbow while she stands and watches, protecting her own daughter. *That* feeling brings her to lightly rapping a knuckle against the wood.

Billy doesn't jump to answer the door, but she can hear him coming. When the door opens, Billy looks disgusted with her. He's a handsome young man, she knows, but the corners of his mouth are turned down in an ugly frown and his eyebrows are pulled up. There's a hand shaped splotch on the side of his face.

The two of them stare at one another for a long while before Susan finds the courage to speak up. "I -," She's cut off by the slamming of his door in her face. She abandons the bag of veggies on the counter and runs to bed, and when Neil asks Billy if he's the one who let them spoil in the morning, he casts a sidelong glance at Susan before confirming it.

She stops trying to help. She tries to make herself scarce in times when she knows something might flare up, even though she knows

she's only hurting him.

It's a Monday in April when she hears it.

"Billy's sick," Max says, coming into the kitchen for breakfast, unloading her bag next to the door before taking a seat.

"How do you mean?" Neil replies, eyeing her over his paper.

Max shrugs. "Said he wasn't going to school when he woke me up. I can just ask Steve to pick me up. He brings Dustin anyway."

"No, you won't." Neil says, folding his paper as Susan slides Max's breakfast in front of her. "Billy will take you. He's being dramatic." And with that he rises, leaves, then comes back a few minutes later. He asks Max about school, holds a conversation just like any other day. The clock reads 7:40 when Billy staggers into the kitchen, looking ghastly.

"You shouldn't have spent last night drinking if you didn't want to be hungover," Neil says simply as Billy heads immediately for the door. Max brings her plate to the sink, then quickly digs through the medicine cabinet for the bottle of aspirin. Susan watches her and when she notices her mother's gaze, Susan presses a hand through her hair, telling her to have a good day at school.

Billy only gets worse over the week. He only comes out of his room to have dinner, or to rush into the bathroom where he gives it all back up. He can't hold food, can barely hold drinks, and shakes when he stands. Susan suggests taking him to the hospital and Neil tuts in

response.

“He’s a strong boy, Susan. His body can handle whatever this is. You keep giving them medicine and their bodies get weak.”

On Thursday of that same week Neil leaves for work early, telling his wife that he has a meeting at 7:30 on the dot. She knows she only hears this so she knows to get up early and make him his breakfast.

By the time 7:40 comes around, Billy still isn’t out of bed.

“Let him rest,” she says when Max goes back in to wake him up.

She drops Max off, then heads to the supermarket. She buys some over the counter drugs from a woman with warm eyes and curly brown hair.

She’s nervous about trying to help Billy. When he’s better he’ll be angry with her, she thinks, for bothering to help him when she continues to stand by when his father hits him. But, she tells herself, he’ll be better. That’s what matters.

She collects her things on a plastic tray - a cool cloth and a bowl of ice water, some cold syrup, one of those sports drinks that promises to replenish your electrolytes.

He is - thankfully - asleep when she comes in and kneels beside his

bed. He's sweating, and his expression reads that he's having a bad dream. She peels the sheets from his body, then dampens her towel with the cold water and dabs it across his forehead.

On her second swipe across his forehead, his eyes open halfway, blinking in confusion. His pupils are dilated, eyes hazy and lost. Susan freezes, expecting a shove or a shout when she hears the word that sends a shiver down her body.

"Ma?"

She swallows, chewing her cheek. She should say no, tell him it's Susan but he's safe, that Neil is away and he needs help. But God, she breaks his heart every time she watches his father hits him and right in this moment he sounds so hopeful, earnest, excited that she can't bring herself to say 'no.'

"It's me." She settles on.

A full body shudder shakes Billy as he lets out a sound of relief, turning his face into her hand. "I miss you so much." He sobs, and she can feel his body relax for once.

"I'm right here," she assures him with a sad smile, pushing his damp bangs back with her free hand.

"He's so much worse," Billy admits, his hazy eyes opening up and looking to her. Tears leak from the corners of his eyes freely, and she

wipes a cheek with her thumb.

“I know.” The disappointment in her voice isn’t directed at him.

“No, no. You don’t.” He insists, shaking his head. She remembers that feeling - the one of complete isolation in your own home. Her face heats up and soon she’s crying with him. “He’s - he hates me, I think. I hate it all without you.” She nods, then moves to dab at his clammy skin again. “I hate it here. I miss going - walking on the beach with you. I miss everything with you.”

She shushes him again as more tears fall from his eyes. “It’s okay, Billy. I miss you, too.” She assures him. This time it doesn’t feel nearly as guilty to assume this woman’s identity.

“I think you’d be proud of me.” Susan stifles a sob in her hand.

“I know I would,” She whispers in response, her hand still affectionately carding through his hair.

There’s a hesitation in the next thing he says. “I met a boy,” he admits, making the hair on her arms stand right up. “I wish you could meet him. I think I’m in love with him.” There’s a twitch of his lips, like he’s trying to smile. Susan remembers Diane - the first girl she’d ever kissed, with deep brown eyes and cropped black hair who wouldn’t be caught dead without lipstick on.

“I’m happy for you,” she whispers, nodding. “You should tell him.”

That makes him smile. “He’ll think I’m getting soft on him.” And Billy wheezes out a laugh that Susan shares.

“I don’t think that’s so bad,” she admits, then pulls her hands away. “Here. You need to take some of this.” She urges him up, then hands him a plastic cup of medicine. He takes it down, then tilts his head back when Susan raises the drink to his lips, taking down a few gulps. She helps him settle back into bed.

“You should rest,” she says, watching his eyes droop as the cold syrup takes effect.

He nods sleepily, and Susan sets her cloth across his forehead to keep him cool. She stays sitting beside him, sniffling as he dozes off. She only stands when she thinks he’s asleep, holding her tray as she heads for the door. The creak in the floorboards prompts another response from Billy.

“Ma?” he asks, blearily looking towards the door.

“Yes, Billy?”

“I love you.”

She knows it isn’t for her, that it isn’t for anyone who lives in this house, but it hits her like a train. A hand clamps over her mouth, and

she lets tears leak from her eyes before she can find it in her to respond.

“I know. I love you, too.”

The response either pleases Billy enough that he’s ready to let the conversation go or he’s fallen back asleep. Susan abandons her tray on the dining room table and collapses into one of the wooden chairs.

She sobs into a handkerchief for the better part of the afternoon before she needs to redo her makeup to pick Max up.

She’s starting to think, maybe, she knows Billy better than she thought.